



# Public safety prompts BLM to demolish American Flat mill

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Over the next few weeks, the landscape at American Flat will change dramatically.

Buildings at a long abandoned mill that once processed gold and silver ore from the Comstock are coming down.

"This is a matter of physical safety. The buildings are a public nuisance and have to be dismantled," said Terry Neumann, geologist and hazardous materials coordinator for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Carson City Field Office.

After a complicated ownership history and several years of legal battles over the 45-acre Storey County site, the federal government secured ownership of the structures.

"In a few weeks, this will look completely different," Neumann said while looking at the demolition progress last week.

After the multi-story mill structures -- some as high as 60 feet -- are brought down and steel and timber are salvaged, Neumann said what's left will be buried in place as part of reclamation work. Later, the site will be revegetated.

The former mill, about four miles northeast of the Carson City line, is in the center of American Flat -- a site with a mining history dating to 1859.

"But this particular mill site has no historical significance. It's been a problem and an eyesore for years," said Joe Curtis, Storey County's emergency management director and Virginia City's volunteer fire chief. "We've had to respond to several fires over the years and it's a dangerous place where kids go to fool around and hang out."

## Youth injured in fall

The catalyst for the BLM to take action occurred in 2001 when a youngster was seriously injured in a fall from one of the structures, Neumann said.

"There's no reason for this to remain a potentially dangerous site," Neumann said. "The mill hasn't operated since 1980."

He and Curtis said a number of "squatters" have camped out at the former mill over the past quarter-century.

"On one occasion, five 30-foot-high redwood settling tanks were set on fire. It took us days to get the fires out," Curtis said.

There have also been rumors that the site, on BLM land, was used as a meth lab.



Work continues in August on the dismantling of an old neglected mill site in American Flat. The Mill has not been in operation for over 25 years. (LISA J. TOLDA/RENO GAZETTE-JOUR)

Houston Oil & Minerals formerly operated the mill, trucking in ore from a nearby mining pit.

In more recent years, Neumann said an operation called Comstock Ore Buyers claimed to have acquired the buildings at auction. But he said no proof was provided.

"At one time, the claimant was using the mill as a residence," Neumann said.

### **Legal struggle**

The federal agency prevailed in a legal battle that began in 2002.

"There is a responsible party and they're on the hook for \$400,000" in clean-up costs, Neumann said. "They want to keep a low profile but they've agreed to pay for everything."

Records on file at the agency show the responsible party is El Paso Corp., which inherited the problem in an acquisition.

Neumann said samples of the soil in the tailings impoundment and water downslope from the old mill will be tested beginning later this year for evidence of potentially dangerous chemicals.

Any work needed on the tailings will be completed next year, Neumann said.

He said a preliminary examination of the soil shows small amounts of cyanide that aren't considered a health hazard. The chemical is used to separate gold and silver from ore.

### **Older site to remain**

After the work began, BLM officials said, they received several calls from Comstock residents concerned that another mill, directly to the south, had been targeted for demolition.

"Nothing is going to be disturbed at the older site. People in the area have a strong connection to it and it's staying just as it is," Neumann said.

At one time, he said, the older site's concrete structures comprised a state-of-the-art cyanide mill.

Curtis, owner of Mark Twain Bookstore and author of "American Flat: Stepchild of the Comstock," said the older mill was built in the 1920s and operated for several years.

The site, a haven for graffiti artists and littered with aluminum cans and other debris, has become a popular party location over the years.

Neumann said federal antiquity laws make it very difficult for agencies to dismantle any buildings that are more than 50 years old.